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Nexus

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

NEXUS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE NO.</u>
PREFACE	1
INFLUENCES	2
PROCESS AND MATERIAL	9
NEXUS - THE WORK	12
PHOTOGRAPHS	
- NEXUS 1	12a
- NEXUS II	13a
- NEXUS III	15a
- NEXUS IV	17a
CONCLUSION	19

PREFACE

There are elements in the Universe, both specific and ethereal, which link objects together. Elements which incorporate symbolism and imagery, elements which suggest time and space, elements about people, places and events. These elements exist in every work of art. There are qualities that remain definite and concrete in their interpretation while there are others which appear vague and impenetrable by contrast. Yet they exist in some intangible balance referring to each other and ultimately their creator.

I have called this body of thesis work "nexus". It involves a connected series of sculptural objects which have been created over the past two years. It is a study of the myriad of influences leading up to and during the final execution of this work. It is also, perhaps more importantly, a search for these connecting points, these links which define this work as uniquely mine. I consider this thesis a personal interpretation of how the past has influenced this physical body of work. It is a search for these elements which bind both my past and the group of work together.

Within this written document, I will attempt to resolve some of these questions. I will discuss concepts, ideas and influences. Also I will address the body of work individually, both technically and conceptually and arrive at a conclusion if any.

INFLUENCES

I believe that knowledge is the key to understanding oneself. I feel that through the education process the doors of awareness are broadened and the possibilities of creative expression are greatly enhanced.

I am a product of my environment, the twentieth century. Technology and information have never been so readily available nor has an individual been so completely bombarded by it. The media; radio, television and newspaper all create an environment which is virtually unprecedented. How does an artist adapt? How should an artist react? Can an individual remain unaffected by this barrage of information? Or is this naive? Can an artist say that they have merely a few influences? Or is this a lie? Perhaps it is both! Can I say that I have not been manipulated by someone or something in the pursuit of knowledge? I don't think so! Through the desire to know why or how, I have placed myself in a situation where I am influenced by everything. Therefore my work must be the sum of this accumulated information. Can it be otherwise? Perhaps an answer is evident when my specific interests are analyzed. Yet the list of what I consider relevant influences are immense if not infinite.

Though, if I must start somewhere it would be with architecture. The design and creation of buildings was always something more than function to me, it was time and space, it was about ideas and forms, to me it was about sculpture - sculpture on a large scale.

Many times when I was younger I can recall studying books on Egyptian architecture, especially the pyramids of Giza. There is perhaps no better example. The architect's name was perhaps lost to time and the pyramid's function a mystery to this day, yet it has stood as a symbol of an ancient culture. An image of mystery and the unknown.

From the geometry of the Egyptian pyramids to the classical detailing of the Greek temple, from the mysterious hieroglyphics of the Aztec ruins to the spiritual detailing of Gothic cathedrals, from the Brutalist architecture and its use of raw materials to the Modernist movement and its slickly refined machine architecture, all have elements which have influenced me. And yet there has been no one as influential to me as the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. It was the ideas and architectonics of this man which created the foundation of my creative interests.

Perhaps it is necessary to backtrack to the years I spent studying architecture and design. Within this field I soon began to realize the impact that this man produced not only on architecture but on design and life in general. He was considered a giant, perhaps the most influential architect that ever lived. I felt an intuitive understanding of his work long before I could isolate exactly what it was which fascinated me so greatly. It was something to do with atmosphere, with arrangement of elements, something which I could not place until much later on.

Wright's philosophy incorporated what he called "organic" architecture with the modernist ability of the machine. Organic in the sense of his use of natural materials coupled with new innovative structural techniques. It was an architecture that spoke of humanity, of man's home within the wild, mankind's union with nature. It was a philosophy which integrated humanity and technology for the first time, developing a unique interaction of man and nature each with its own sense of identity.

Throughout his life he experienced many tragedies the greatest being the brutal murder of his first wife. This crisis and others spawned new directions within his life and his work. As a response to his isolation he developed the Prairie style house with its sweeping roof lines and massive overhangs. It was an architecture symbolizing the solitary man struggling against nature. It incorporated the hearth as the central focus, the warming fire out on the plain.

He initiated a style which was later identified as his Mayan period. It was about decoration and grids. It was an architecture based on units. It was an extension of the Prairie style and yet it incorporated Mayan architecture and imagery. It further developed man's integration with the machine yet keeping his ties to the past, keeping his history. Towards the end of his life his design became much more simplified and yet more symbolic at the same time. It was within the design of the Guggenheim Museum that I began to understand this symbolism.

The main element of the building was a funnel like shape which incorporated an interior spiralling staircase. This staircase in

essence started at the top of the gallery directing the viewer around the artwork until they reached the bottom level. This staircase/ramp defined a vast area in the centre of the structure which ran from the street level to the top of the building. As one stood at the bottom, in the midst of this area, it appeared as though it resembled a cavern with cliffs. It contained the spirituality of a cathedral and the primitive qualities of a cave. It seemed that through the design of the "Guggenheim Museum", Wright had come full circle. He utilized his past styles into an architecture which was truly unique. It was at this point that I finally began to understand his language; the continuation of man's quest for refinement while understanding his past.

As I left architecture and moved towards sculptural form, the ideas of Wright never left my mind. What were these illusive elements which I found myself so intuitively drawn towards? Was it the use of materials? Was it the human aspect in which he used them? I could not say exactly, though I recognized a few things. I believed in his unity of the "organic" and the machine, how one element fuses into the other and becomes intangible. Architecture was perhaps the most important influence yet it was at the top of a list both huge and varied. As I strived to develop my sculptural ideas I began to look further back into my past - specifically my childhood. I had always been an avid reader of Science Fiction. From the original Flash Gordon adventures to my first Avengers comic book, I was hooked to other world adventures. Whether it was the idea of

space/time travel or of alien architecture/civilizations, it became concrete as an aesthetic in my mind at a very early age. As a sculptor I began to draw on imagery from these past influences. It was quite animated and rather naive yet it was a foundation on which my ideas began to integrate. As my awareness grew my urge to become a more "serious" artist did also. My work started to become surreal in appearance. I began to combine elements in my work that were both architectonic and organic at the same time. Ribs, bones, skulls, crosses, combined with grids, structure and foundations. They spoke of my past interests in Architecture and Science Fiction, yet conveyed something which was more foreboding - an implication to the darker side of expression. These visual elements remained ambiguous enough to leave the interpretation open to the individual.

During this time I kept abreast of many current events both artistic and political. I studied other areas of art, painting especially. It was at this point that I came across my second main source of inspiration, Swiss surrealist painter H.R. Giger. When I first became aware of his disturbing paintings I felt that he was saying something about my experiences, again it was deeply intuitive.

Within his work he spoke of many things to me such as anger, architecture, time, terror, grids, machinery, eroticism and sex, it was all here. It was implication and suggestion, it was obvious and brilliantly subtle, it was the future and the past, it was the mechanism and the organism.

It was within his painting that I began to understand myself, my work, and my direction more clearly. It was not so much the stark horror imagery that I found influencing but rather the implication of the organism unified with the mechanism. In these paintings I found this combination of elements both disturbing yet fascinating at the same time. He used machine parts such as pistons and gears intertwined with human appendages and orifices. He reduced mechanical grids and human bones into elements which were no longer one or the other. It was a link which I began to realize ran through all of Wright's work and throughout every phase of his life.

Both these men suggested things which I began to identify in other artists as well. Louise Nevelson with her placement of units and parts communicated ideas about the formal integration of spatial elements within a hole. The Italian artist Pomodoro combined fluid exterior forms which housed rib-like interiors. To me it was Giger in three dimensional form. Through my own medium I recognized similar concepts developed by sculptors. Howard Ben Tre suggested industrial forms in glass which were directly reminiscent of gears and machine parts. They were about architecture and history, they were timeless.

It was at this point that I tried to correlate my influences into something which was my own vision. I had taken these influences and strived to create something perhaps not necessary new but rather unique.

Throughout this "study" I have retraced many of my personal influences. I have uncovered things both known and things which

have previously been hidden. I have discovered things about my past which have helped me resolve questions regarding myself and my work.

It was at this point with this newly acquired information that I started the "nexus" series.

PROCESS AND MATERIAL

My approach to glass has never been a subtle one. If I were to be questioned as to my method of construction, I would definitely say Brutalist. Brutal in the sense of deliberate abandon for traditional cold glass working techniques. Force and violence have become my tools in the process of creating art. Subtlety within Anarchy.

I have not always treated glass with this total lack of regard. When I was a glass blower earlier in my glass career, I strived to understand the fluidity of this medium. Hot glass was a media which was spontaneous and methodic at the same time. It required a great deal of balance and concentration within a relatively short time span. It was like a performance, movements critically timed in order to produce a given effect. Hot glass allowed virtually any manipulation into any shape yet it seemed to suggest things which were curvilinear, organic.

At this time my sculptural ideas began to lean more and more towards the architectonic. They were striving to develop an aesthetic which was more regular and rigid, and one which described hard straight lines as opposed to random curvilinear ones. Glass blowing no longer seemed adequate. It was at this time that my constructivist attitude began.

It was a totally new approach. I began to cast glass into sand, graphite, metal, or whatever means which would allow the production of consistent building units. These units which when cold could be manipulated by a hammer and chisel, sandblaster,

diamond saw and other cold working techniques. It was a process which would allow the work to be put aside at anytime and resumed at anytime. It was a way of working which I found more natural and inherent to my personality.

As a result, this constructivistic approach allowed my work to become much larger. By using a laminating adhesive I could bond these units together creating sculptures which began to integrate my ideas of architectural scale and imagery.

It was during these experiments with the constructivist philosophy that I began using industrial plate glass. It was thick and heavy and available in sizes that the hot glass facilities could not duplicate. Plate glass which when combined together could produce work which was virtually unlimited in scale. It seemed to be the ideal resource. Architectural plate glass seemed to relate to my search for time within the past and future. With its uniform regularity it became the perfect building block.

With the intent of developing a sense of time and decay in my work, I began to manipulate it in a much more direct, violent way. I used tools such as a hammer and chisel to fracture the edges of the glass. I used a diamond saw to add scrapes and ridges. I incorporated a high pressure sand blasting unit to puncture and round off all the surfaces. I used a simple glass cutter to create jagged sharp appendages of glass. And ultimately a few sculptures were painted, totally denying the inherent properties of glass. It was a process which was direct and spontaneous. It was what I called instant aging.

As my concepts and ideas came to refinement, so too did my technique. I began to selectively place fractures in the glass where they were simply random before. I sandblasted some areas severely and left others alone. I chipped and scrapped with more awareness and with more subtlety. The constructivist method allowed ideas to be visualized much quicker and in a more direct complete way.

It was at this point, confident with both my ideas and technical approach that the physical body of work known as "nexus" began.

NEXUS - THE WORK

As I started to produce the nexus series it became clearer that two directions were staring to emerge. There was what I called the "horizontal" style and the "vertical" style. Both directions developed at the same time and are of the same mode of thought, yet each described slightly different concerns.

The horizontal work was the first to be realized. I used relatively thin (3/8") plate glass as my basic material. A glass cutter, epoxy and a sandblaster were the only tools involved in the physical process. With simple materials and a direct approach I was ready to incorporate my ideas with this raw material.

The ideas I had were to develop forms as simple as possible, yet containing the full informational and visual impact that I felt necessary. I began by cutting "appendages" or "ribs" from the plate glass. They were long and knife-like and sharp on all edges. These appendages seemed to suggest the exterior of the form. They defined the area around them and created a barrier. I began to assemble these units. They took on an arrangement which best suited symmetry and regularity. As these ribs drew towards the centre, a focal point became evident. Smaller appendages defined the space at right angles to the larger ones. Grids of small glass pieces gave detail to the central area. It began to take on a cohesive appearance. The long cantilevered ribs defined the parameter space, while the small ones added interior dimension and detail. The unit as a whole began to



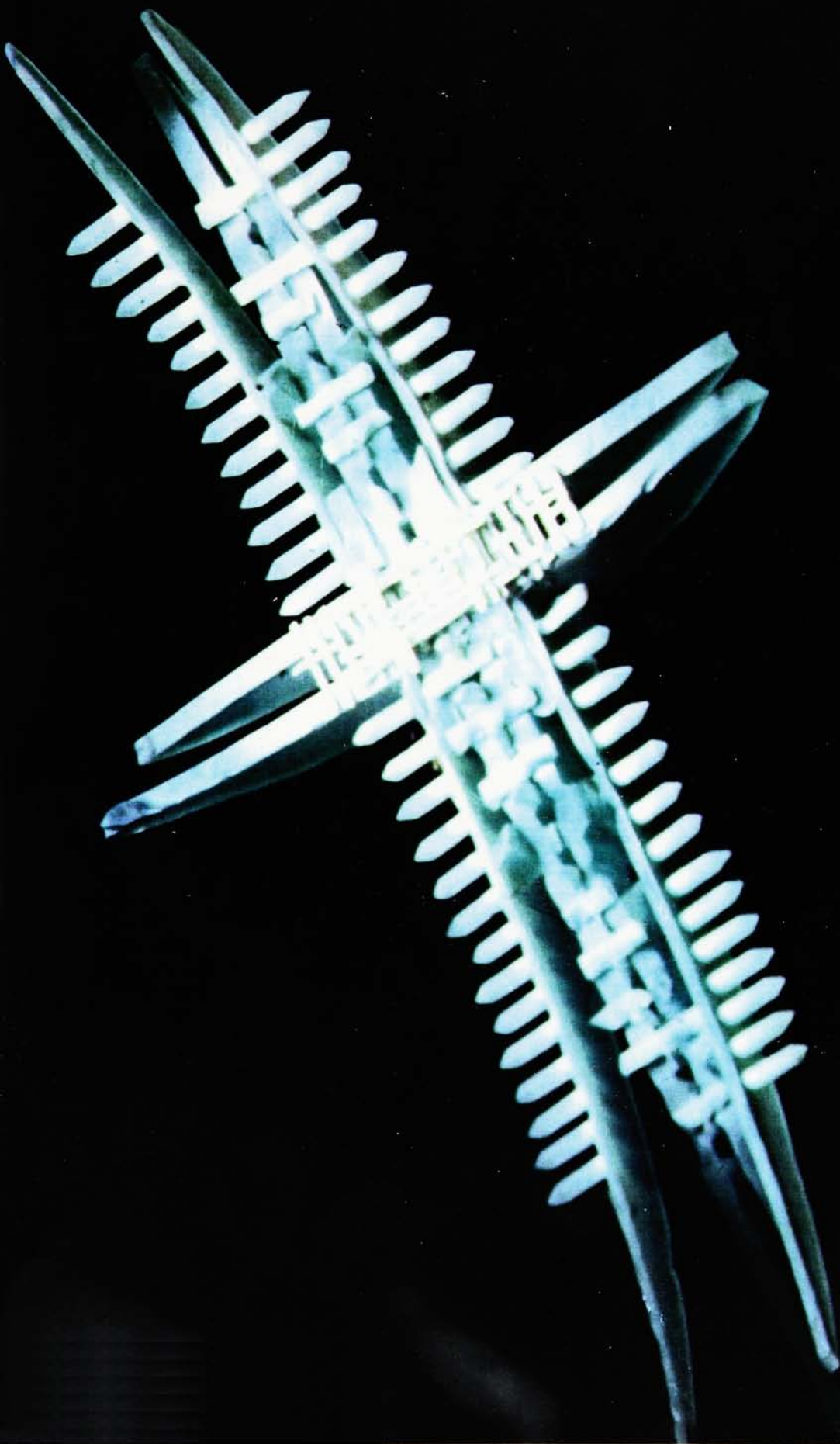
NEXUS I

encompass my concepts of time and architecture. They began to emulate feelings of artifacts, both of the past and of the future. Through the symmetrical alignment of units they spoke of a manmade object. They implied a mechanical process, something which was very architectonic. And yet the sparse use of elements within the structured body spoke of the organic. It was reminiscent of skeletal remains. It was something insect or animal like. It was disturbingly alien and yet alarmingly familiar at the same time.

Thoughts within my head began to formalize. I began to understand this newly acquired information. This new sculpture was the culmination of my thoughts and experiences. It reflected my concerns about objects having a timeless quality. About a sculptured entity powerful enough to suggest many things yet subtle enough to provoke thought and curiosity. It was the integration of the mechanism and organism or the union between the manmade and the organic.

I considered Nexus 1 to be the most subtle work. It was the most symmetrical and the most simple piece within the series. The arrangement of units was more selective and sparse as compared to the following works. It contained absolutely no information that was not necessary. Every element whether in relation to itself or other units was an integral element. No increment could have been removed without over simplifying the entire sculpture.

Nexus II on the other hand began to elaborate on the same idea. It was a darker glass than that of the first, brown as opposed to green. It was also a heavier thickness of glass, adding further



to its presence. Nexus II was more specific about a definite image. If the first sculpture appendages appeared straight and sleek, then the second ones became jagged and curved. Where the first one defined space horizontally the second began to utilize its vertical volume as well. Where Nexus I's overall quality was one of lightness and transparency, then Nexus II appeared dark and threatening by comparison.

The imagery of Nexus II definitely suggested skeletal remains much more so than the first. The curved arms seemed to capture the essence of movement, of a creature which had been fossilized in motion. It revealed a more disturbing atmosphere - if the first one was serenity then this one was torment. These two sculptures reflected the study of the light and dark side within a single series. The subtle and the specific, the serene and the disturbing.

It was during the volumetric study of Nexus II that lead me to develop the tower pieces, Nexus III and Nexus IV. After I completed Nexus I and II, I felt inclined to create sculptures which more readily implied scale. Scale in a vertical sense as opposed to horizontal. I wanted my work to be monumental-larger than life.

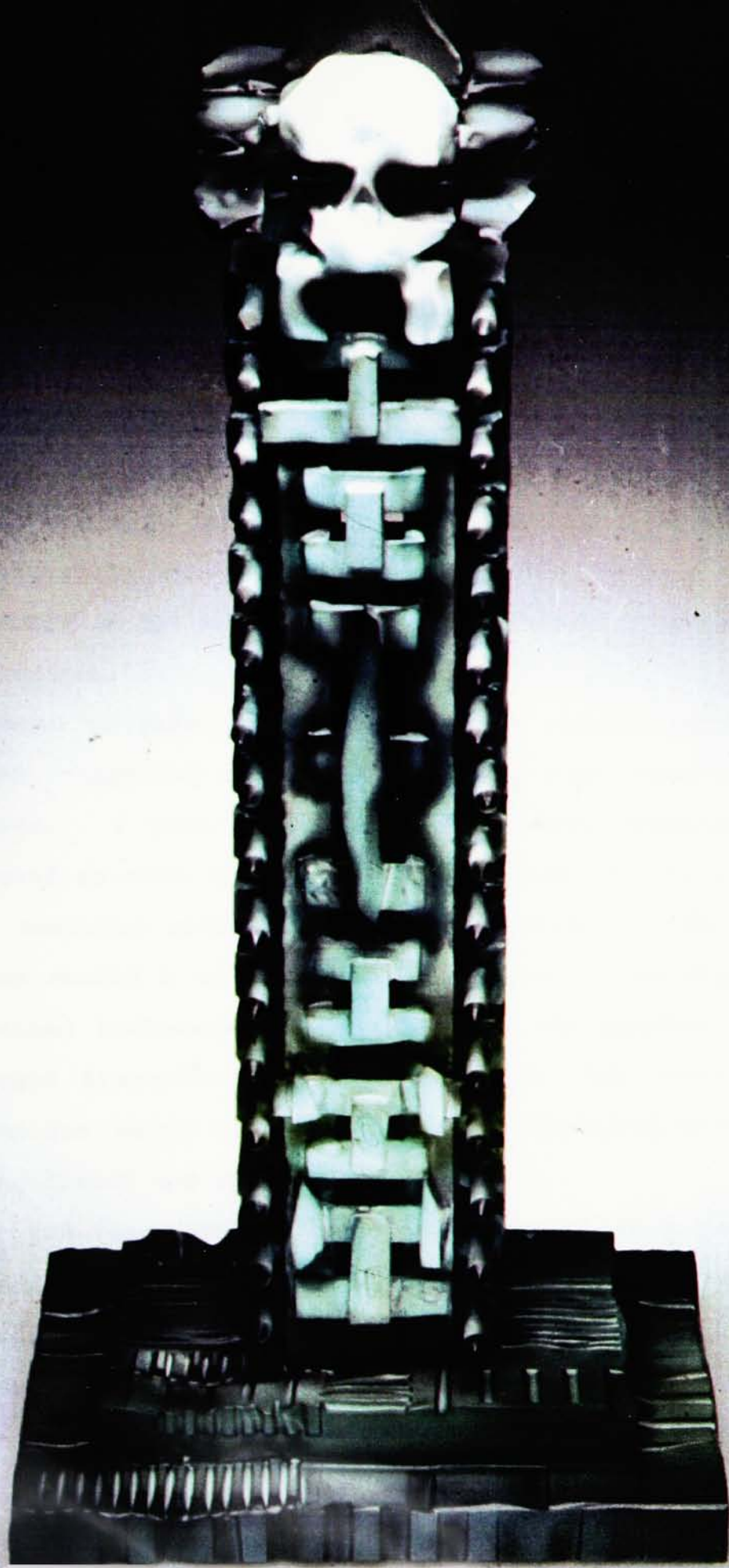
I was thinking of many different things at this point. Images of my past began to surface increasingly. Images about alien places and surreal phenomenon, I wanted to somehow trap these ideas in a three dimensional form. I wanted to integrate these experiences with my present concerns without becoming too literal or obvious. For the first time within this series I felt it necessary to

actually translate more of "who I am" into my work.

I began to construct with heavier 1" plate glass. Using a stone saw I cut large rectangular sections of glass. These sections when laminated together formed the central core of the sculpture. Already visions of something architectonic and tower like were forming. I began to cut smaller sections of glass which described the sides of the tower. Bullet like projections violently protruded from the smaller pieces. A skull was placed at the crown of the sculpture surrounded by diagonal protrusions. The entire structure sat on a tiered base which was heavily sandblasted with patterns and grids.

It was evident that upon near completion much of my previous imagery was carrying through. Not only was there a sense of time and decay, but the feeling of the organism/mechanism was here also. The grids of glass along the side of the tower coupled with the patterns of the base suggested the manmade. It was the addition of the skull and bullet like projectiles that altered this sense of formality. These elements spoke of concrete imagery, of a set of circumstances which were no longer vague.

Upon reflection, I chose the image of the skull because of its relevance not only to modern times but to my childhood. Perhaps the skull is a somewhat unusual symbol, yet it was a current theme throughout many of the Science Fiction stories I read as a child. To me it was not a morbid symbol of death but an image of man throughout history. I felt it was the ultimate carrier of time. The projectiles were also images of time, perhaps spears of an ancient tribe or thorns of an alien flower. Together these



elements created a timeless quality. They revealed personal information while being universal at the same time. They acknowledge my childhood references while suggesting modern day issues - issues of war and destruction, plague and starvation, ignorance and cruelty.

After I completed the building process I felt the sculpture was lacking in some aspect. It was a monotone blue whitish colour which was left intact from the sandblaster. I felt the need to deliberately alter the surface of the glass - to be able to directly apply colour without going through extensive technical procedures.

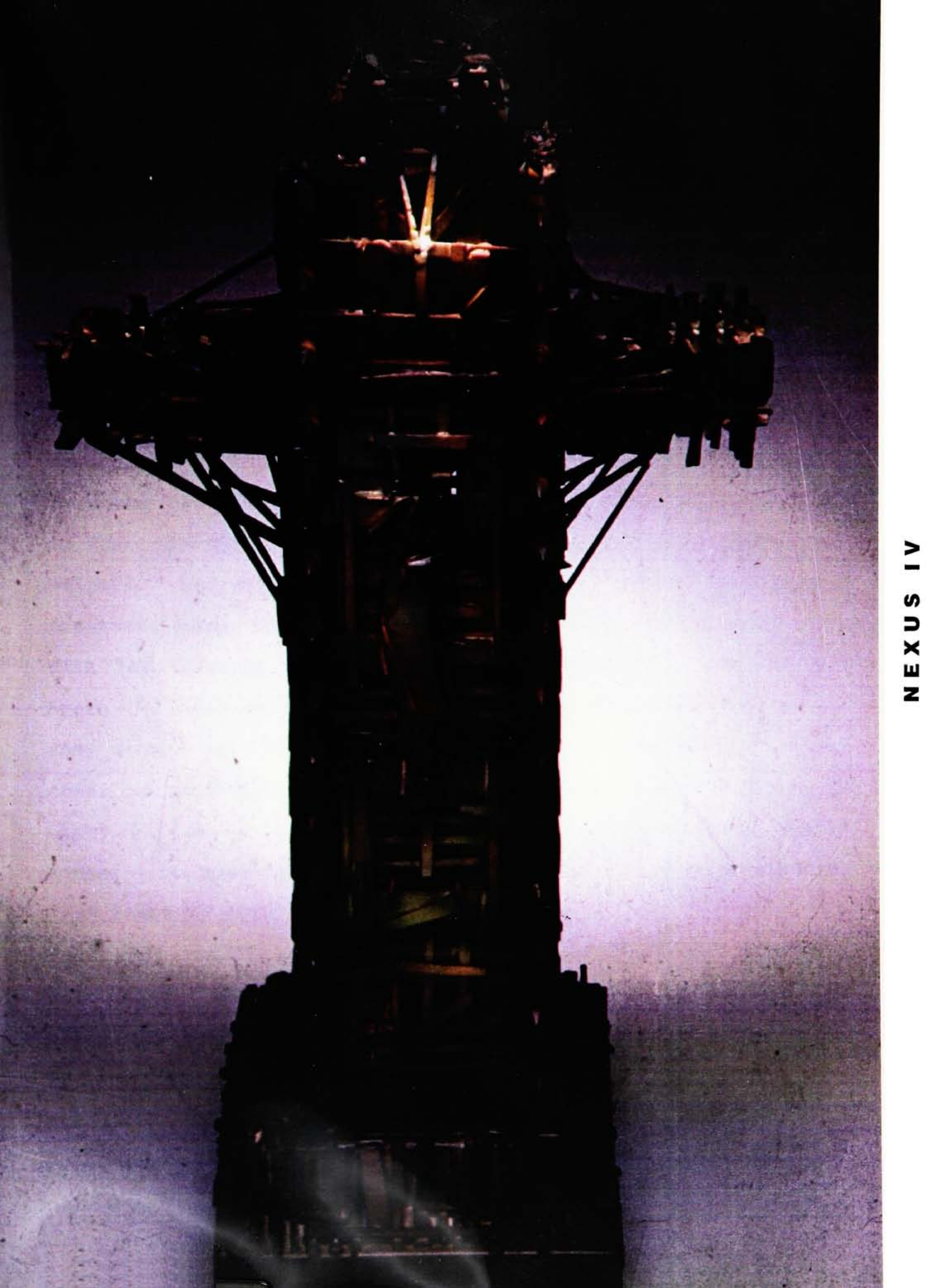
I began to paint the sculpture with acrylic paints and an air brush. Layering colors, highlighting some areas while darkening others. I soon realized that no other technique would have allowed so much freedom. The subtleties of colour combined with the textured surface produced the perfect effect. The darker tones evoked a smokey burnt feeling while the highlighted areas remained luminescent and spiritual. The process of airbrushing allowed tremendous variation in colour and texture. It was a technique which reflected my whole constructivist approach by being direct and spontaneous.

With the development of this new technical information I began to consider the last sculpture within the series, Nexus IV. Thoughts about my past continued to surface, yet the imagery which came to me was definitely more specific. It was also the most serious in content. I was thinking about Religion and how I was raised as a child in a Roman Catholic family. How or why I

came to address this subject is unclear yet I felt it had always been with me.

Throughout my life religion had always been present. As I was raised in a working class family I came to experience many contradictions within this religion. Contradictions about ethics and proper conduct, uncertainties about blind religious faith and the "Fear of God". As I grew older and more aware of world events, these contradictions became more evident. Scandals within the many religious societies instilled an ever increasing doubt and suspicion in me. Religious war and conflict throughout mankind's history only strengthened these thoughts. It seemed to me that anyone of minute intelligence could see that religion had become big business. It was not that I was anti-religion whatsoever but rather the questioning of authority.

These thoughts formulated into a physical construct called Nexus IV. Again I started with the totem or vertical format and I began to building upwards. It was almost immediately that I realized a few things were changing. Where Nexus III was more simple in the use of elements Nexus IV became complex. The central volume of the totem was similar to that of the previous one yet I began to add significantly more detail through the use of glass "sticks". These sticks were comprised of very thin plate glass cut into fine strands. These strands when applied overtop and around each other began to appear like scaffolding. It was at this point that an important visual decision was made.



NEXUS IV

I had always visualized a cross form when I thought about constructing this sculpture, yet was hesitant about being too obvious or literal. I considered other alternatives yet always came back to this solution. It was through the use of a scaffolding effect that made this idea possible. I utilized these strands of glass to convey an image of something architectural and religious at the same time. These strands of glass intended to give the sculpture an air of contradiction. Contradiction in the sense of one not knowing whether this object is being constructed or demolished. These glass units referred to the contradiction within my own religious experiences and beliefs. They also evoke a sense of time and decay carrying on the same visual characteristics as the previous sculpture. With the idea of contradiction in my thoughts I began to air brush. I used colours which did not in any way refer to glass. They ranged from whites, yellows, reds and greens in the central area, to dark browns and blacks at the exterior. I began to apply layers of colours over previous layers creating subtle tones. It began to appear very modelled with colours blending from light to dark, translucent to opaque. The end result was a sculpture that appeared immensely foreboding. While the form suggested religion, it also spoke of power and of corruption. It was sacrilegious and it was holy. It suggested an architecture that was once great yet had been abandoned in the midst of a burning inferno. At a distance it grew larger than life enveloping its surrounding area as if it were a black hole waiting to implode.

Within this written thesis I have attempted to resolve questions about my work and about my past. I have discussed concepts and ideas and have reflected on my many influences.

The Nexus series of work has been a search for different things. Things about time and space. Things about images and symbolism. Things about elements which bind this series of work together. Things which make it uniquely mine.

Upon reflection each of these sculptures was an experiment. Not only a technical variation but rather a conceptual one which required technical adaptation. As the work evolved over a period of time, it encompassed many different attitudes and directions. Each piece was unto itself a complete entity and yet by similar techniques and/or concepts they formed the group called "Nexus". As I reflect back to its conception (Nexus series) I realize that my influences had formed an awareness which allowed me to create this work. It was as if this body of work was destined to be, merely waiting for the proper circumstances within my life to do so.

I have placed a very strong emphasis on the Past and how it has influenced my work. Yet the duration period of when this work was actually made was also very significant. It was one thing, as always, to imagine the direction of a series and another to produce it. As I envisioned this series of work I began to develop new techniques to accommodate them. Whether it was through chiselling glass with a hammer or air brushing it with paint, each successive technical breakthrough lead towards a more cohesive group of work. Each technique revealed information

which was as important as the concept itself.

As I worked my way through the series I began to recognize these elements or connecting points in my work. It was not so much a visual thing as it was an intuitive one. I began to duplicate certain patterns almost unconsciously. It became natural to reproduce certain elements while randomly placing others. It was a system of thoughts and movements.

Certain elements in my work I can identify, others I cannot. Some I can attribute to H.R. Giger, others to F.L. Wright. More often than not these elements are a complex variation of influences; Architecture, Science Fiction, Machinery, Biology, it is quite endless.

In the end I must attribute these elements and/or connecting points to the influences I have experienced throughout my life. I have commented on many of the more significant ones, yet there are obviously still countless others which play an important role. It is the experience of events both major and minor that have built my creative fabric. And it is through the understanding of this fabric that I have strived to develop my own vision - my own unique art.

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